Truth o' Women

Josephine Daskam Bacon

DISCARD

TRUTH O' WOMEN

By
JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

TRUTH O' WOMEN
LAST WORDS FROM LONG GONE LADIES
BLIND CUPID
SQUARE PEGGY
THE STRANGE CASES OF DR. STANCHON
THE INHERITANCE
THE MADNESS OF PHILIP

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TRUTH O' WOMEN

LAST WORDS FROM LADIES
LONG VANISHED

BY

JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

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TRUTH O' WOMEN

I

Forgive me, now.
If my lip curled when you kissed me,
Forgive me, now.
I have been long under the earth, among the
roots of things,
Forgive me, now.
Dust drifts through the lips you gripped so
fiercely,
And I hardly remember what it was that I
missed,
But it was something . . . something . . .
I smiled good-by to it, whenever you kissed
me. . . .
Forgive me, now!

II

When you weep over my grave,
I smile gently.
"Come soon, my dear, come soon,
We shall rest better, near each other."
When my daughter lays her flowers above me,
I smile sadly.
"How long will it be, my child, before you are
longing to creep in by me?"
But when my little son's feet run about my
grave,
Then my dust is bitter in my mouth,
And I know that death is the supreme cruelty.

III

You were selfish and weak, my love, my own love,
But I grew generous and strong, loving you.
You were careless and cruel, my heart, my dear heart,
But I grew tender and kind, loving you.
Now that it is all over,
And the earth heaps over me,
And the sky folds over me,
(One lies as light as the other)
I muse softly upon these long gone things.
Was it your cruelty that kept me kind?
Was it your selfishness that made me strong?
Should I have been like you—without you?
Now that it is all over,
I wonder. . . . I wonder. . . .

IV

I died a virgin.

My own mother thought me cold.

My father mourned my beauty ungathered.

The man who might have held me

Marvels yet at my ripe, unwrinkled loveliness.

Stately I walked,

With my goblet of love untasted,

To my cool, unhandled grave,

And lay down in it,

As I had lain in life,

Alone.

And this I did

For one reason only:

I was afraid

I would not pay

The price of love.

Now the worms laugh at me.

V

I died dishonored.
My husband's feet burn with rage
At the feel of the very soil of our country.
My daughters came here once,
When I was laid here safely, at last.
Only my little son
Runs quietly every year,
On my birthday,
And lays his violets over me.
My friends sigh, and glance aside, and say,
"Thank God, it's over,
And she's unconscious.
At least, the agony
Of remembrance is spared her!"

Fools!

O fools, all of you!

Did you never hear of heaven?

This grave is heaven.

No old-fashioned heaven,

Full of foolish angels—

They have no heaven,

For they have no memories!

VI

I was sorry to leave you,
Because I knew you needed me.
But are there no women who are sorry to die,
Because they need their husbands?
I wanted, dying, to be one of them!

VII

I lie here at rest and content.
I have had my share, I have done my work,
I have paid my price.
Almost every one who walks in this churchyard,
afternoons, would do well to envy me.
Once only, every year, I am faintly unhappy,
When my husband comes, on the day I died,
(Always on that day!)
And lays a wreath on my grave.
Far away, on the other side of the world,
There is a man who goes, on another day,
Every year of his life,
(O my heart, do you remember that day?)
And lies lonely on the beach where we lay
together,

And thinks of me.

You can understand, can you not,

Why I am faintly unhappy on my death day?

You see, I cannot say to my husband,

"Go away! You are wasting your wreaths on a grave.

He does not come here,

Nor does he celebrate this day ghoulishly.

He lies on a beach on the other side of the world—

And he does not lie alone!"

VIII

I was a famous woman.
There were lines of carriages at my interment,
And well-known men lifted their tall, black hats
gravely,
When they lowered me into this earth that ends
all.
They said,
"She had a wonderful mind.
It would be helpful to know
What last ripe thought came slowly to birth in
her, dying!"
I was not able to tell them,
For I was dead.
Nor do I know what is carved on the stone
above me.

But just as my tired heart faltered, missed the
beat, and stopped,
The golden moment of my whole life, the per-
fect point,
Fleckless, satisfied, utterly illusioned, the future
made present,
Flashed into my brain and illumined it.
I stood at my first ball, beautiful and eager;
Warm, radiant, proudly shy, I held my dark
head high under the lights.
I smiled.
And at that smile, so shy, so proud, so con-
fidingly powerful,
From here, and there, and everywhere,
Tall youths hurried out from the crowds,
And rushed in a laughing race to get to me first.
I waited, smiling.

"They want me!" I thought, gratefully,
"They want me! I am lovely, then!"
This golden moment formed like a glittering
bubble in my brain,
Hovered a moment, burst gently . . .
And then I died.

IX

One night I gave you my heart.
Grave, happy and rosy, it lay in your wonderful hands,
Burning like a tender lamp in a crystal bowl,
Shaped from our tears of ecstasy.

But you were ever like a restless child:
You ran away with it, you hid it from me,
You tossed it in a cup-and-ball love game,
You danced, to tease me, holding it over your head.

I was far too proud to scream out in terror,
I was much too weak to capture it from you,
I laughed when you laughed, and kissed when you kissed,

And tore at my side when you left me idly—
I knew it would burn in your hands and bring
you!

And then, one day, half laughing, half loving,
You slipped, in dancing.
The crystal shattered,
And my heart broke, and lay there, bleeding.
The pool of blood spread red between us,
And your face fell, like a child's that's scolded.
You held out your wonderful hands to me,
pleading——
But they were empty.
I watched you sadly.
You could not walk through your love's own
heart blood!

X

My youth was white,

Because it was empty.

My early years were gray,

They were full of duty.

My middle life was golden

With the flaming sunset of a late found love.

Be patient, sisters,

It may be life is waiting at the turn of the road!

XI

Hail Mary, full of grace!

Dear Mother Benedict,

Can you not hear me, trying to give you comfort?

I think you would hear me better, Reverend Mother,

If you'd cease your listening at my tiny grave stone,

And listen upward.

I am not there, dear Mother!

I was not there when it happened. All your sorrow

And the sorrow of the Sisters is quite wasted.

I was not there.

That night he pulled at the postern,

And I ran quick to answer him, being on duty,
Before he had seized my habit, before my rosary
Broke in his hand, before his hot breath scorched
me,
My white soul flew, inviolate, up to heaven.
What that poor maniac raped was a dead body.
I never knew, I heard but a sweep of singing,
Like Sister Cecily, when the organ's soaring,
And I fell, floating in it, and swirled upward,
Dizzy with happiness. I saw a shadow
Fall heavy on the ground . . . but I was sitting
Between the knees of Mary.
And she kissed me,
Saying, "How white you are, my child, my little
one!"
Mourn me no longer. Praise the Queen of
Heaven,

Who guards her flock untainted. And she leads them
By the still waters. Mourn me not, dear Mother!

XII

I laughed my way through life.

Now the man that loved me best weeps every year at my grave.

My friend poured her great heart out in tears of passion:

The man she loved forgot the day of her funeral!

Is this a lesson for lovers?

XIII

From out of my great sorrows
I made little songs,
Like that pale boy
Who lies buried
In a far land.
(One of them,
The briefest,
Is carved above me.)
Why can we not
Out of little sorrows
Make great songs?
Will any one tell me?

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XIV

Thirty years I kept my husband's house,
And tended my children.
I went to church, and gave to the poor,
And nursed my friends, and did my duty.
I was never very happy,
But I knew that when I died,
No one could say that I had failed in anything,
Or done wrong to God or my family.
I knew that I should have my reward, later.
Why are people good, else?
Many that I knew did very wrong,
But I knew that they would be punished, later.
Now I have been here a long while,
But I have not begun to be happy, yet.
Surely there is some mistake here!

XV

When I descended the steps of this tomb,
I took Fame with me.
I have moved the hearts of thousands.
My name on their lips
Was the wine of my life.
You all know this,
But you did not know
That the wine you poured me
Kept life in my veins,
As the veins of the dying
Are kept alive
By the blood of others,
Poured out to save them.
It was not the rose-crowned,
Festal wine,

For which, only,

Grapes should be crushed.

It was the measured, rigorous dose,

That wards off death,

Poured with a deliberate hand.

I, a cold-eyed physician,

Fed it into my heart,

Starved once and forever,

By a cruel love.

I lost my life—

The Public gained it.

XVI

This is the grave
Of an old woman.
I was eighty-two
When I left the earth,
To go below it.
Are you surprised
Because at my head
Grow tiger lilies,
And tiger lilies
Grow at my feet?
Learn this lesson:
The fiery hearted
Keep their fire
Till this old earth freezes!

XVII

Here by my grave, all snowed with sweet, faint lilies,
The Rector stops, white head against the blue sky,
And says a prayer.
"God bless her," he says, "Miss Mary!"
God always blessed me.
Like the slim, white lilies
My school girls plant above me, I grew, shaded.
If any one has treated me unkindly,
I have no memory of it. Every Easter
I dressed Christ's altar. All the others were younger,
But me they always wanted. On His birthday
I never cared so much to dress the church:

I never loved red berries so well as lilies.
"Your house," the Rector said, "smells all of
lavender,
Faint, fragrant lavender—like you, Miss Mary!"
Blue things and white I always liked the best,
"The Virgin's colors, dear child," he used to tell
me.
The teacher said to me once,
"My little Mary,
Shall I never see you blushing?"
I blushed once, only.
The day that I was buried,
And they turned and left me, in tears, while I
lay, smiling,
White in my white shroud, underneath the lilies,
A girl stayed, sobbing. And a boy stepped be-
hind her,

And put his hand upon her shaken bosom,

Aud muttered softly to her.

Sobbing louder,

Frightened, she ran from him.

His heel cut deeply

Into the tender lilies-of-the-valley

Planted above my heart, and broke and tore them. . . . .

Surely God loved me when He took me early!

XVIII

Happy, adored, a bride,
I died suddenly on my wedding night.
Why is it that no brides come here, weeping,
And why do women, long married, keep my
grave green with their tears?

XIX

I lie here, murdered.
I do not complain
Because a drunken negro
Cut my throat swiftly,
For the sake of my gold beads,
And some few spoons.
It is not that.
But if all my neighbors,
Who did so much for me,
After it happened,
And filled my house
With their friendly presence,
And filled my front yard,
The day I was buried,
And filled the court house,

When they condemned him,

Had come to see me,

When I was living,

I shouldn't, maybe,

Have been so lonely.

Perhaps the neighbors

Would have kept him away,

And then I needn't

Have lain here, murdered.

XX

We are two women, lying together here,
Who lay together in life for thirty-five years.
In all that time we never had but one quarrel.
How many of you who are married can equal that?
We shared in everything and we understood each other.
I do not see how there can be any real respect,
Or any real privacy such as women love,
When you marry a man.
A man makes trouble.
They do not like the kind of houses that we like,
Nor the same friends. And they will always hurt you,
Because they laugh at the wrong things.

I like a man for a lawyer and a man for a doctor,

And for a minister, too—but not to live with.

What is a home? Some one waiting that loves you.

And we had that together for thirty-five years.

No growing children grew like wedges between us,

Pushing us farther apart, dividing our loyalty.

No sick jealousies festered its sores in her heart.

I was never worn down with fears for the future,

Pinched and worried and curt over Life Insurance.

She never wept in the bed at a son's late footfall,

Furtively climbing the staircase. I never shuddered,

When men joked at some girl too light of ankle,
Fearing it might be my daughter!
I tell you we had but one quarrel in thirty-five
years.
We were always pleasant. Are your homes
always pleasant?
Why did you always laugh at us? Tell me!
Why did you always laugh at us?

XXI

You will see from my tombstone
That I died accidentally,
Plunging through darkness
Down long stairs.
But this is not true,
For my husband killed me.
He was most violent,
And threatened me always,
If any man
So much as passed by,
And nodded and smiled at me.
Very few knew it,
For he was ashamed of it.
On that night
He had talked himself furious,

And I thought
To cure him by laughing,
Treating it lightly.
Just by the stair head
We paused, talking.
"Well," I said, "are you ready for bed, now?"
He turned white and looked at me oddly,
"God!" he cried, "what devil made women!"
And then he pushed me.
As I rocked downwards,
I knew it was death.
But I died smiling—
I knew how he loved me.
Every sunset,
In snow, in blossom,
In fruit, in harvest,
He comes here, groaning.

In icy rain-storms,

In scorching drought,

In bitter wind,

He comes here, groaning,

Because he loved me.

Have all you women,

Safe, unmurdered,

Such an assurance?

XXII

Over my grave the early moss and star flowers
Push out thick and lush, while the other graves
Are brown and dead.

They cannot tell why they come, those two,
To lie entwined in the white dusk,
On my soft moss and star flowers.
Their kisses burn as thick as the stars over me,
And my heart,
That beat only for love, lived only by love, died
at last of love,
Flames and burns still in my old grave,
And forces into life the early moss and star
flowers.
Where else should they love but on my grave?

XXIII

I died, not yet a mother.

And my child,

The brave, the unborn,

Eager for life,

Needs must die with me.

The gates of life

Closed on him,

Sadly, definitely,

Just as his clawing hands

Were pushing them apart.

Who are you, pray,

To stand above me,

And blame me?

I died so that he should not live.

Did I arrange this world?

XXIV

I have been puzzled,
Since I died,
Trying to think
What was the matter.
We were not happy,
Perhaps—not happy,
I and my husband.
I mean by that
We had no merry
Playtimes together.
Sometimes women
Talking secretly,
Made me blush,
And turn from them, blushing . . .
We were not merry.

But we had lived
Ten years together.
Ten years I sat,
Sewing beside him,
While he read books.
Why did those women
Talk to me slyly?
Why did they tell me
I was unhappy?
Why did they trouble me?
After I left him,
He withered slowly.
It may have been
That he did not love me,
Just as they said.
But he withered slowly,
And when he died,

I could have told them
It was not illness,
My husband died from.
My husband died,
Not wishing to live.
I cannot say
It made me unhappy.
I never was happy,
That is all.
It never came.
It may be happiness
Is an art.
I never learned it.
All I wonder
Is this:
You living,
Who wander here,

Perhaps if you learned

To mind your own business,

Many of us

Would not be lying here,

Under your feet.

XXV

Myself a mother, I died long before the woman
who bore me.
Over my grave she walks unconsciously.
Beside my brother's, who came here a youth, she
wipes her eyes;
But at my little sister's, who was buried here,
a child, long before me,
She kneels and weeps out her heart.
We dead are not jealous: that hell is reserved
for the living.
But I sucked once at her breast.
Is it because I am a woman, too,
That she cannot love me,
Even when I am dead?

XXVI

Because I lie scornful, in the Potter's Field,
Do you imagine for a moment that my clay
Rots in a different way from any other?
Do not deceive yourselves for a moment—
My arms are as firm and white
As his daughter's who put me here.
Indeed, I lasted longer,
Being of sounder stock than his daughter,
Who had inherited his vices
In her tainted blood.
Do you imagine for a moment, you fools,
That my dead ears missed the boy choir's whining?
I should have laughed in my coffin, for I knew
That the boy soprano was a son of his.

His mother,

Poor boy,

Died in another town and lies, unhallowed,

In another Potter's Field.

I bore him no children.

There will be quite a few of us

Ready to welcome him,

When *he* comes down.

He does not expect to meet us,

For he will lie in the center of the cemetery,

Held down respectably with red granite,

Polished on four sides,

With a verse from the Sacred Scriptures

Cut in deeply on three panels,

For each of his three wives.

When he is lowered beside them,

Their bones will crumble away from his coffin,
in horror.
They have tried for many years to escape and
join us,
Out here in our Potters' Fields. But the law is
heavy.
They were married to him in church; they must
lie in the church-yard.
They have made their graves, poor women, and
they must lie in them!
God help him when he meets us at last, the old
devil!

XXVII

My husband's house
Was a treasury of beauty.
Often and often
We have gone hungry,
So that he might
Buy him a lute
With ivory stops.
Often and often
We went in patches,
For frail carved shapes
Of misty gilt,
Tarnished mirrors,
And bubbled glass,
Like spilled juices
Of ruby fruit.

But we were glad.

For he loved Beauty,

And I loved him.

Then came the plague,

And the famine after,

And starving mobs

Fought in the streets.

Blue to the lips

With the biting cold,

We burned his beautiful things,

To keep us warm.

The swan-shaped beds,

The lacquered stools,

The gold, carved harp,

The wrought chests of sandal and scented fir,

All, all fed the hungry flames.

And so we lived a little longer.

He wept as he burned them.

He did not know

That I had been throwing the treasures of my soul

(Dreams carved like ivory,

Pale hopes like silver mirrors,

Longings like bubbles of ruby glass)

Into the ravening fires of his passion,

For years.

But one must live, at any price,

At any price . . .

XXVIII

My death,
Like my life,
Was conducted with perfect propriety.
My husband and my children
Mourned and mourn me
As few women are mourned.
My servants,
Even now,
Bring flowers to my marble mausoleum,
Than which our cemetery
Holds none more costly nor classic.
I am impatient neither by birth nor training,
And I trust that I shall lie here, equably,
Until it shall please Almighty God
To call me to Him.

These things being so,

Will you tell me why I must suffer such outrages

As each summer brings to me?

Why must I,

Who never permitted

The least unnecessary familiarity,

Even from my husband,

Be forced to endure,

In this, my last, sacred resting place,

The brutal indecency,

The shamless abandonment

Of those two for whose unspeakable trysts

My hallowed tomb is degraded?

Even though I may be dead,

They should remember

That I am, at least,

A gentlewoman!

XXIX

I rushed violently to my death
In a noise and red flame.
My man that I killed
Rushed to death, too,
But not as I planned—
For his soul rushed from me.
Now, too late,
I see my mistake.

XXX

I was one of those blessedly damned,
The Great Lovers.
One-half of my days
Was a hell of calm,
A misery of cynical, self-schooled placidity—
For I had smothered love.
The other half
Was a heaven of pain,
A rapture of torturing uncertainty—
For love had burst out upon me again.
Envy us, O ye fortunate!
Pity us, ye who are unsuccessful!
For we are better dead.

XXXI

I died while sleeping.
There was no knowing
Where I was going,
There was no weeping.
Are they still keeping
The bells all ringing?
Some one seemed singing. . . .
Or was I dreaming?
There is no gleaming
Of any light here—
Is it always night here?
Or am I still sleeping?
Does no one love me
Enough to cover me?
People should know,

When they are dying—
There should be crying.
When shall I know
Where I must go?

If I am seen,
In the twilight, wandering,
It is because
I died while sleeping.

XXXII

You all thought me exquisite,
And so I was.
A piece of dainty perfection,
And so I was.
I was like the brittle, creamy shell
The grasshopper leaves behind her,
Ribbed and polished and tinted,
Like some frail ivory carving out of the old
East.
(But I had gone,
Long before.)

XXXIII

"Ah, Life," I prayed, "be kind to me!"
And then came Love.
And I laughed a while and suffered long.
"Ah, Life," I prayed, "be kind to me!"
And then came Fame.
And I suffered long and laughed a while.
"Tease and torture me no more," I prayed,
"Be truly kind to me!"
And Life smiled, and was kind—
And I lie here.

XXXIV

Before I passed below the white waters of death,
I marveled greatly over what it might be.
But now that I float under these white waters,
Cloudy, slumberous,
With murmur of bees,
And summer rain pattering,
I marvel no longer,
For I know.

Be at peace, troubled wife,
You who come softly, secretly,
Glancing about to see if you are alone,
Standing at my feet and searching,
Searching tirelessly with your eager, asking eyes,
Trying to pierce my bland tombstone.

No little mysteries lie hid here,

No spells for you to learn,
No map for your straying feet.
My secret is buried with me, poor wife,
And it is not for you.
And yet I will tell it to you gladly.
Listen and be calm.
Hold what you have
And rest in it,
As I hold what I have
And rest in it.
Each of us was hungry, poor wife,
Each of us was filled.
Be patient: you are the mother of his sons,
I could not be that.
But I was the mother of his dreams,
(Oh, poor, poor, wife!)
And that you can never be.

XXXV

I was calm in my life,
And I am calm now, in death.
Always I loathed
Heat and hurry;
I found my husband
Heated and hurried.
Always I shrank
From noise and struggle;
I found my children
Noisy and struggling.
Only my last illness
Brought me peace,
For all that I hated
Was kept from me.
If this is heaven,

It is not what I fancied.

But if it is hell,

I find no suffering.

I think that Death

Is simply an End.

XXXVI

A beggar lies here.
The stored riches of my love,
Never till then invested,
I drew out of life, one day,
Holding them ready.
With one superb gesture,
The one great conscious gesture of my existence,
I handed a blank cheque to the man I loved.
He dipped his pen, smiling, into my deep heart,
Lowered his head,
And wrote.
I looked where he had written,
And the sum
Was so small,
That I could have feed him from my purse!

Smiling, I tore the cheque through,
And counted his pennies into his hands—
I knew then that I was bankrupt
To Eternity.

XXXVII

We were twin sisters.
I might have lived,
But my twin, bent on death,
Had the stronger will,
And drew me after her,
Unwilling, to this grave,
Where I lie,
Unhappy.

XXXVIII

An old woman lies here, resting.
If you ask me what I have learned from it all,
I can tell you very briefly.
There are but two things in life,
Only two and no more.
Love, satisfied and pressed out to the last drop,
And the unhampered operations of the clear-working, conscious mind.

XXXIX

As I rest here, dead,
Only one thing troubles me.
I fear, sometimes,
That the trumpet may blow,
And I shall be called
To go up to heaven.
I hope that God
Will let me rest here
A long, long while,
For I had no rest
For a long, long time.
I shall not mind,
If I miss for a little
The joys of heaven,
And I hope that God

Will understand me,
And not disturb me,
Even for His Judgment.
I shall not mind
If I am not judged.
One, more or less,
Could hardly be missed.
I only start
And tremble a little,
When my family
Gather above me.
I am afraid
They may need me, again!

XL

Now I am dead,

Do you ever come here?

No. Your feet

Would startle me, walking,

And I should tremble,

Under your weight,

Even now . . . even now!

You would not come

Where I lie buried.

Men do not come

Where we lie buried,

When they have killed us.

For it was you,

Poor thing,

That killed me.

Great as my heart was,
Small as your soul was,
Yet you could kill me.

High on the sea
Of my surging heart
I carried your little,
Selfish sailboat,
All those years.
I could have lifted
A man o' war
On my ocean of love,
And conquered nations—
I loved my sailboat!
I could have wafted
Cyprian galleys,
Through star-close nights,

Through perfumed tropic nights,
To fabulous moonlit shores—
I loved my sailboat!
I could have freighted
Safe, broad barges
Down locked canals,
Through fields of satisfied,
Ripened harvests,
The grain of years—
I tossed my sailboat!
Oh, my heart,
My lost and wasted Atlantic,
Could you not spare it,
You pitiful sailboat?
Could you not sail on
Some shallow pond?

XLI

When I was young, I read many tales
That told how men pursue women.
When I was older, I wrote many tales
That told how women pursue men.
Now I am dead, I could tell the stone mason
A tale for my tombstone:
"Life pursues ye both!"

XLII

To all you living,
Who walk here hot-hearted,
I say this:
Life will pass. Wait.
To you in reality dead,
Dragging your bodies after you,
Persistently vital,
I say this:
Death will come. Be patient.
To you who have never lived,
And will probably never die,
I say this:
Leave this graveyard.
You are not worthy of it!

SHAKESPEARE'S WIFE

Now that I'm dead and all our quarreling's over,
I'm sorry for the time we wasted at it.
He was a good lad, good at bottom, I know.
'Twas no one's business, if he wasted his time.
I see that now.
I thought too much on the future.
I wanted him to be well spoke of, I did,
After his death. I fretted too much. I see it.
"God's mercy! Think on something else!" he'd cry,
"'Tis warm i' the sun, is't not? The bacon's hot!
I'll read my play to-night and make 'em laugh!
Kiss me, and smell the buds! Not kiss me? Fie!
A sulky piece!"
"I only sulk for your sake!"

I used to scream at him. "Why don't you work!
Let some one know Will Shakespeare's alive on
the earth!
You'll put no gold in the chest, following the
tinkers!"
Well, well, he was young . . . he was
young. . . .
What harm did his plays do?
They weren't the worst of his mischief, God
knows that!
Why must I dream on seeing him Alderman?
The more fool I. Silk purses can't be made
Out of sows' ears.
My father told me once,
"Never aim too high, lass! Best keep low to the
ground!
You've not so far to fall that way." He was right.

Perhaps if I'd not aimed at Alderman,
I'd not have fallen to a poacher's wife!
Lying so long, I've come to feel his way.
"'Tis warm i' the sun, is't not?" Poor boy, poor boy!
You that are quick and warm yet, hark to me!
Your life up there is sure too short for quarrels.
Kiss while you can, I tell you, kiss while you can!
For there's no kissing underground. . . .
Poor boy!

PILATE'S WIFE

I have been worried, ever since my death,
About my husband.
I warned him many times of that young Jew—
"Don't let those ignorant natives kill him," I
begged,
"You will be bitterly blamed for it,
Sometime, somewhere!"
He was too fair, too logical, my husband.
"But think," he said, "what I am bound to do,
In these outlandish districts!
Rome rules by tact, by suppleness, by smoothness.
It seems they want to kill him—we must let
them.
Bloodthirsty rabble!"

He washed his hands in water before them, later.

They were so crude, one spoke to them in pictures.

He did his best.

But still I dreamed. . . .

"Why did you ask him, that day, *'What is truth?'*" I said.

"You will be thought to have mocked him, maybe,

Sometime, somewhere!"

"But why?" he answered, "he talked well, the boy.

I asked him what I asked him. What *is* truth?"

But still I dreamed . . .

I have always feared that this small thing would go down,

In records read long after, against my husband.

"Crucified *by* Pilate," men may say,

When we all knew

That this was not so.

"Crucified *under* Pontius Pilate"—yes.

But that's the year it happened, only.

As we might say, "In the late winter,"

Or "In the early spring."

I fear they may not understand my husband,

Sometime . . . somewhere. . . .

NEWTON'S WIFE

All my life I have known about apples.
All women know about apples.
Will you say, any of you,
Why it turned out that I
Watched them fall all my life,
And learned nothing from it?

The first time when they were falling
(I saw them—I saw them!)
I was walking through the orchard with my lover.
His arm, slipping around my waist,
Touched my heart. . . .
Could I wonder about apples, then?

The second time.
One dropped at my feet,

Ripe, perfect, a gift from the sky.
But my first son was waiting to be born.
I thought of him, my great gift,
Falling from God,
And he leaped up in me. . . .
Could I wonder about apples, then?

The last time I noted them,
I hurried through the orchard with my gardener,
Counting with him the yield
For my jam pots.
The years press upon one,
And there is much to do. . . .
Could I wonder about apples, then?

But to him, my husband,
Lying at ease in our orchard,
(With no hand at his heart,

No child in his body,
No household in his care,)
Watching the fragrant, spicy globe
Detach itself softly,
And thud at his idle feet,
The great thought came.

It seems that his waiting hand
Tossed in that moment
The stars to new places.

It was as if
He had picked up our earth,
And dropped it again!

Listen, all women:
Lacking my lover's hand,
Lacking my leaping babe,
Lacking my household care—

Might I have bound the silver moon

To the iron earth?

Dreaming, should I have read the riddle of the apple?

Would lack of busyness

Have waked in me the dream?

Or are there no dreams in women?

I ask you the question.

LUTHER'S WIFE

He was a great man, yes,
And I was proud of him.
Even now I'm proud of him.
It's more than every one can say
Who's come this far!
But even the dead have their feelings.
It's not so easy, mind you,
To keep your temper,
When there's a big family,
And a man that must be everywhere at once,
And know everything,
And have a finger in every pie,
Shouting about with his noisy hymns,
Cuffing and kissing and managing—
No, it's not easy.

But, there! We all know what men are!
And life's short enough at the longest,
When a body's busy.
But what is the sense of standing by my tomb-
stone,
(Thin, sickly foreigner, with no hips and a breast
like a boy's!)
And talking such stupidness?
"So great," says she, "so powerful, so sunny!
And look, with it all, he had thirteen children!"
Fool! Thin, thread-paper fool!
I had the thirteen children!

THE WIFE OF CADMUS

My husband came of a race that continually
plowed new paths.
Forever seeking unknown folk across cold seas,
He drove his dark galleys.
I, of an older clan,
Wise in quietness,
Warned him, uselessly and forever.
"Check," I told him, "this busy mind of yours,
Or it will wear you away.
Inquire less eagerly,
For my people say
That those who seek, alas, may find!"
But he shook me off,
"I must know! I must know!" he cried.
"Knowledge is a snake that stings,

My people say," I told him.

"Still I must know!" he cried.

And then he made his letters.

The terrible power of my people awoke in me

At the sight of those toys

(Mystically shaped,

Crooked and curved and twisted,)

And I prophesied.

"Beware!" the Voice surged out of me,

"Oh, insatiable Phœnecian,

Beware!

Burn those terrible toys,

For because of them many shall burn in agony!

Cut them to splinters with your ax,

For because of them many shall be butchered!

Forget them with all the strength of your mind,

For because of them forgetfulness shall be banished from the earth!

Hold the good word harmless in your throat,

And it can go no further than your friend.

(It is hard enough, at best, to understand each other!)

But these crooked toys

Shall betray you to generations yet unborn.

Oh, fool!

Oh, dark, implacable Phœnician,

Beware!"

I fell as one dead.

But he neither saw nor heard me,

For he was playing with his letters.

The day of the Older Peoples was done.

You who regret this,

Know that I warned him!

THE MOTHER OF MARY AND MARTHA

Sitting there, sitting there,
With her big eyes!
Dainty as a cat, she was.
And never a hand's turn done in her life for
any one!
Smiling, and braiding her hair,
From the day she was little.
While my poor Martha
Would be pouring the water,
And dressing the meat.
"Troubled about many things," was she?
I'll warrant you!

Look ye, all prophets,

If you're to be eating,
And the floor's to be swept,
And the fire's to burn clear,
And you're to sit soft—
Why, there's one must be troubled!
She never grudged it,
Did my poor Martha.
It's her old mother
Grudges it for her.

Foolish young prophet!
If she had sat there,
Low at your feet,
Holding her big eyes
Up to your wisdom,
Where would they be, then,
Your fire and your supper?

Yet you rebuked her,

My poor, rough-haired Martha,

Working her youth out,

For one and another.

And all for a pair

Of big eyes, turned up to you!

Prophet and no-prophet,

You're all the same,

Young men and old,

Sinful and holy,

Gentile and Jew!

CAESAR'S WIFE

I have lain here for centuries. I think
That many things have happened, since I died.
It must be so.
Nothing, of course, has happened
To Rome. But other things, that do not touch
The Empire, must have changed,
And I am wondering
If women have changed, since I was Caesar's wife.
I used to think they would. He only smiled.
I always meant to marry a great man,
And when I married the greatest man on the earth,
I knew, of course, that such a man was not
As others. I avoided much pain, I think,

By seeing this clear. Wives of the great must
learn it.
He never really hurt me.
Once my maid,
That loved me (a strange girl she was, that girl!)
Threw back her head and cried,
"Madam, I wish
The Gods had let me live some centuries hence,
To see us women grown up from human dolls
To human beings!"
"Why, you strange, strange, thing,"
What can you mean?" I answered . . .
but I knew.
"What can *you* do?" she stormed, "*you,* you,
yourself?
You're Empress of the World—what can you
do?

Nothing. Just nothing at all. For Caesar's
wife
'Must be above suspicion!' That's for you!
That's a great life for the Empress of the
World—
To be above suspicion!"
Strange, strange girl!
"They and their Cleopatras!" she stormed on,
"May the Gods blast them! What's the sex of
Venus,
Ruler of God and men together? Tell me!"
"Child, child," I said, "there must be
Cleopatras,
And Emperors' wives must know it and be silent.
So long as there are Caesars, they must have
The Freedom of the City. Time will change
Many a thing, I know, but never that.

That wracks me not."

And then she spit out,

"Bald!

Bald, and ashamed of it! King of the World,

And writhing over a bare patch on his skull!"

(A strange child!)

"Why," I said, "you little wildcat,

Emperors are only men. They're made the same."

"Thunder of Jove!" she cried, "do you remember

The day he crouched here with the pains in his belly?

Weeping and groaning like a ten-year child!

An Emperor with a bellyache!"

"Come, come," I said,

"While men have bellies, Kings must have them, too,

For Kings are only men. This wracks me not."
She was a strange child.
"Madam," she said, "*what* wracks
you?"
I spoke. Once and once only did I speak,
The wife of Caesar.
"I have," I said, "ambition.
Since I was ten years old, I have had ambition.
I must stand out from the ruck.
And being a woman,
I had no other way but to marry greatness,
And stand out with it. So I begged my father,
"Marry me to the greatest of the Romans,
Whoever you may think him."
And he did it.
And while the world stands solid, I shall stand,
The wife of Caesar.

Nay, even if Rome should shrink
From off her seven hills to an old, dead city,
Remembered only for her ancient glory,
(Thought this is folly!) Even if the wide world
Should prove but one of the stars that wink above us,
(Though this is folly!) I shall stand out of the ruck,
The wife of Caesar.
But could there be a time
When a woman (not a heathen, like that Egyptian!)
Could rule alone—herself? Could there be a time
When a woman could send out ships, make war and peace,

Speak out her mind in the Forum? Cast her vote?"

I ceased. Her eyes grew wide. She stared at me,

And drew aside as if my mind had sickened.

"The Forum, madam?" she babbled, *"cast her vote?"*

Strange child! I had her killed, quietly, that night,

And save for her, no other ear on earth

Has heard the thoughts of Caesar's wife.

I have lain here

Some centuries, I am sure. I cannot but wonder

If thoughts like these have ever crossed the minds

Of other Emperors' wives?

ADAM'S WIFE

I am known among you for three things:
I became possessed of the knowledge of good and evil,
I tempted the rest of the world to share my knowledge,
I wrapped my mysteries in a garment which I myself made.
To those of you who learn first of God from the page where first you learn of me,
I ask this:
Has He accomplished more than I?

LINCOLN'S MOTHER

I was afraid at first,
Afraid and awkward,
For I'm plain like,
And hadn't the time,
Nor much chance,
To learn high manners
Nor high ways,
Such as I knew would be needed,
When I got there.
(You see, we are all
In a special place
We Mothers.)

From all the lands,
From all the times,

We have been brought,
And there are angels
To wait upon us,
And we look up
Through spaces of cloud,
And each one watches
Her great son, working.
(You see, that is all
We wish to do,
We Mothers.)

There was a lady,
With a shining forehead,
Very haughty.
Her son's name
Was Saint Augustine.
I'd never heard of him.

There was another,
With wide, great eyes.
Her son's name,
It seems, was Plato.
He wrote great books,
In the ancient days.
I had supposed all such were heathen,
And I never held with Catholics.
But there we were,
All sitting together!
(You see, we were there,
Because of our sons,
We Mothers.)

It's hot and awkward,
Not being used to it.
I was unhappy.

Then all of a sudden
Music was somewhere,
And I smelled roses,
And it grew lighter,
And that tall Monica
Dropped to her knees.
It was the Mother
Of Jesus Christ,
Sitting beside me!
And she was smiling,
And we were talking,
All in a moment,
About our sons.
And now the time
Will never be long enough,
For all we find
To say to each other!

(You see, we are all

Cut to one pattern,

We Mothers.)

DANTE'S WIFE

Where's the fairness of it? Where's the justice?
Time tests all things: I've not been impatient.
Trusting to time, I've lain, calm as marble,
Knowing how time bites and burns, like acid,
Leaving gold triumphant. Yet they're saying,
"Dante and Beatrice," still. Dante and Beatrice!
When will it stop? He never had his Beatrice.
Is the way, then, to keep faith with a woman,
Never to have her?
Does one win remembrance
By giving nothing to remember?
Surely,
The angels up there have some care for justice?
All that spun gold of hair and starry eye,

I bore with, for the fairy tale it was.
He fed on words as others feed on pasties.
Florence breeds word-eaters.
But when all's said and done,
Reality's what counts, like marble,
That outlasts sugar plums, (I said.)
But now it seems that this, my marble tomb,
Fades to a misty cloud, and her star eyes
Shine like eternal steel through her gold hair . . .

"Dante and Beatrice," still, *"Dante and Beatrice"!*
I say, he never had her! It was dreaming,
Nothing at all but dreaming. Shall a man's dream
Outreach my arms, his words outlast my lips?
We marry them, then, to be forgotten by them?

Would you, who never glance toward my tomb,
Have wept upon it, had I been, like her,
A dream?
I could not even shine like a star in hell—
I had not earned it.
It's Francesca glows there,
Eternally magnificent. And Beatrice
Beams down on you from heaven, and will beam,
As long as the angels.
I fit best in the grave.
His heart held them: for me he built a tomb.
And from that tomb I warn you.
Leave all poets
To their dreams. For what they cannot have, they'll love!

"Dante and Beatrice," faugh! *"Dante and Beatrice"!*

ONE OF BLUEBEARD'S WIVES

I hang here, dead, like the others.
I knew that it would be so, when I married him.
I think we all knew.
But there will be plenty more to marry him.
They have asked me to speak for us all,
And tell you why.

Oh, you kind husbands,
Good men, patient, with no terrible little keys,
With no monstrous closets (pale, bleeding
closets, to tempt and torture us!)
Why are your eyes empty of the light
That laughed out of his?
His hands were cruel, yes,
But they were not clumsy.

He understood us better than you,

Even while he was killing us!

And so,

Since you have to kill us, it seems,

One way or another,

We preferred to die,

Quickly and beautifully,

While we ourselves

Were quick and beautiful.

Tell us, kind husbands,

Who allow your wives to die comfortably,

In their beds,

Is there no one of you

With that magic bird-call in his voice,

That shakes our blood?

Is there no one of you

With that swift, piercing, mocking beam
That shoots from his cruel, loving eyes
Into our depths?
Is there no one of you
Whose cunning fingers know how to twine
Into the roots of our lives?
Oh, if there were,
Then you might drown us in the blood of our
hearts,
Then you might shrivel us with the lightning of
your eyes,
Then you might tear out the roots of our souls—
As he did. . . .
As he did. . . .
Oh, if there were!
If there were!

MILTON'S DAUGHTERS

"He for God only, she for God in him. . . ."
We wrote this as he told us, he who saw
More of his God than others, being blind.
We, who were young and not blind, looked perhaps
Less eagerly at God than at his creatures.
How would it be to have a common father?
We often wondered . . . sometimes, even we felt
That we knew God too well.

How beautiful,
To twine about his chair and work for him!
Beautiful? Yes, but often very dull.
Oh, we were often very, very dull!

He was forever driving us to our knees—
'Twould have been cheerfuller to sit on his,
Sometimes, we used to think, and tweak his hair,
And laugh with him!

God's not enough, you see—
One wants a father of one's own. That's selfish.
But girls are often selfish . . . ah me, ah me,
How tired and cramped our fingers used to grow,
Writing of Paradise!

God spared us that,
Most kindly, and we had not to go there,
Nor meet with Gabriel nor the others. Here
Are kindly souls, and merry, but no Great Men.
This pleases us, for a Great Man, we think,
Wears out too many women in the making.

POTIPHAR'S WIFE

Above my heavy tomb,
Lightly hangs the blue sky.
Beyond the scorching sands
The cool stars rest.
Behind the clatter of human words
Silence remains.
These things were so,
When Nile water was young,
They will be so, therefore, forever.
Thus it is clear to me,
That the gossip of four thousand years
Is no more in the ears of the Gods
Than the gossip of four days ago.
The tongues of men are fugitive,

And they echo no louder in the ears of the Gods
Than the clatter of the cranes.

Truly, my ears are as scornful as the Gods',
And the sands drift deep over my hot heart,
And the vermilion and gold of my life are faded,
Nor will the lotus uncurl for me again.
To this I bow,
Who bowed to nothing on earth but Time.
Will Time, that brings healing,
Fail at last to bring justice?
I ask of my Gods,
And they answer, no.
Our pyramids stand unchanged from the beginning;
But the jackals renew themselves with every year.

Only priests and kings may read the story of my tomb;
The foolish gossip of an alien hireling
Still clucks and babbles into ignorant ears,
Ears of a low-born crew,
Fit for the washing of my chariot wheels,
In the old time.

I speak not to such.
I speak, a daughter of courts,
A playmate of young kings,
A sister of governors,
A wife of one bred up on the steps of thrones,
Contemptuous of crowds and the smell of crowds.
Wherever there are any such,
We meet across the centuries,

And smile at each other
From behind the skirts of majesty.

If I have loved, I have loved—
What is that to you?
If I have stooped, I have stooped—
So have the Queens I served.
If I leaned to a flute player under the stars,
If my eyelids drooped,
And I grew pale,
Under the peaked fans,
When a Scythian slave,
A killer of lions with his bare hands,
Drove his eyes into mine,
As he swung by
Below the daïs—
What is that to you?

But how dare you believe
(On no word but his own)
That an Israelite accountant,
A smooth-handed keeper of money-books,
A foreign foundling of a servile race,
Being offered my love,
Refused it?
How dare you, I say, believe this?

The high born pay great honor, smiling, to such.
The high born give them rings and trust them with all moneys.
The high born heed their shrewd and cunning councils,
(Being themselves neither shrewd nor cunning.)
But they do not offer them love.

A sensual race they were, those Israelites,

Timid and frantic, whipped to dominance,
Hungry and dreaming, fed and arrogant.
Lusting awhile—then whining to their God.
Proud in their new-washed penitence—then rushing
To Ashtaroth in the shade!
They wearied us.
"They'll rule us yet," my husband said, "the hounds!
The cunning, fawning hounds! Look out for them,
If once they get the upper hand! Look out!"
I laughed at him.

To think that one light word,
One violent scribbling of a baffled lust,
(To give his scourged heart peace and purity)

Should stand four-square, like our own pyramids,
And chuckle down the centuries at me,
A lady of Egypt!

There's not sand enough
In all the desert to scour clean my name,
Fumbled and pawed by his outrageous hands,
That writhed and clenched—and wrote!

Oh, sacred Nile,
Wash my bones bare and leave them in the mud,
But first wash clean that lie from out the Book
Of Joseph's terrible Tribe!
And let me cease.

THE MOTHER OF JOAN OF ARC

Not a word more of it! I'll hear no more!
'Tis different, you say, in heaven? Stuff!
Stuff and nonsense!
A poor story, indeed,
If They in heaven
Hadn't the wit
Of us poor souls!
Trust me,
Trust an old woman,
All so comfortable here,
With the other good souls
Out of our village.
(We stick together.)
Voices?
I'll warrant ye!

There's voices enough in the world.
And even here, for that matter.
But must ye heed 'em?
There's one voice
A girl should heed,
Country or town,
In heaven or on earth,
And that's her mother's!
She was a wild thing,
Always and always,
Mooning and dreaming,
While her poor mother
Was working and saving.
Often and often
The sheep would stray,
While she'd be staring
After her Voices.

'Twould have been no harm
(Aye, we'll all swear to it!)
If I had fed her
A taste o' the stick!

I was too easy.
Had I been firmer,
She'd not gone ramping
Over the world,
Stuck up on horseback
For men to gape at.
Is that a maid's work?

"God made the King.
Him and the Saints
Sure can be trusted
To look to their own!"
I made it clear to her,

While she'd sit staring,
Yet she must run,
Wild as a hawk,
Staring and listening—
And the sheep scattered!

"Faithful in little,
Faithful in much!"
If that's a lie,
Show me the truth, then!

Down to us, resting,
Friends from one village,
The gossip trickles.
(Us that loved gossip
Love it to-day, ye see.)
Holy Father, it seems,
Has sainted our Joan,

All for ramping about on horseback!
The world's a weaker place than it was.
Saints came harder in my young days.
Folk got no glory for flouting their mothers!

Well, well, God bless him,
He's but a man,
When all's said and done.
If he had asked
A bit of advice
Over his sainting,
Friendly like,
I could ha' put
A flea in his ear!

THE WIFE OF COLUMBUS

His eyes were fixed on vast and unguessed
shores,
And gazing ever seaward,
He stumbled into chains at the last.
Blind, he gave you continents.
You, unseeing, shut him into a cell.
He found that for which he was not searching:
You threw him into prison because he found
more than you could dream of.

Now, at the last, even his vast, far prairies bear
the name of another.
I, voyaging for years through the heart of the
great explorer of all years,
Scorned all corners of the earth,

And was glad to creep below it, at the last.

All of you are blind,

One as much as the other!

NERO'S MOTHER

I wait so long for him!
It seems but yesterday he was so small—
(A tiny baby he was.)

I know he grew,
They all grow, and they change, but he was not
Quite like the others.

He will have kept, I know,
That special sweetness.

Not all children have it.
Not all love beautiful things as my boy loved
them.
Music and jewels, even the leaping flames,
He smiled at, praising them.

Some lads are rough,
And cruel, live only for themselves—not he.
He'd bring a flower and lay it in my lap,
And stroke its petals with his little, pointed finger,
And bid me stroke it, too. He'd choose an ivory,
Or a bit of coral or jade, instead of a sweetmeat,
Or a strain of music, always, instead of a toy.
I have forgotten all the days that came
After his youth. A cloud of dim, past years
Creeps over me when I try to think on them.
So I go back to when he was so small,
So small and sweet, with those soft curls of his. . . .
I wait so long for him!

THE WIFE OF JUDAS

The time is long enough, now.

I may speak to you.

First, I spit upon you!

Not for cruelty: men are ever cruel,

And the years fall hard on the dead.

No, I spit on ye for fools.

Was it not enough that he should suffer as he did?

Was it not enough that he should die?

Because the only Man that ever he trusted with his soul failed him,

Because the Faith on which he staked his all, rotted and broke under him,

Because the Master he looked to establish above the stars forever,

Crept off like a trapped vagabond—
Must you have poisoned his very name,
Till it stinks down the centuries?
I curse ye and I spit on ye!

My husband was the treasurer of all the moneys:
'Twas he that held the bag.
Do men pick on a thief and traitor for that?
Tell me, ye thick heads, tell me!
He was well trusted of them. Enough of it.

More than the rest he dreamed upon that
Prophet,
Wrote down his lightest sayings, told me of
them.
"I swear to you," he said, "on my father's soul,
There is naught He cannot do.
One flash, one cry—

A thousand angels wheel through the blue to
Him!
All times, all weights, all measures are to Him
As naught. Thoughts merely. What forms in
His mind,
Blossoms to shapes of earth. A manifest God."
"I am neither Greek nor Jew," I said, "forbear."
Often at night,
He would toss muttering on the bed.
" 'Before Abraham was, I am!' " he'd cry, and,
" 'Thinkest thou not my Father would send a
legion?' "
And then he'd clasp his hands——
"Oh, Master, speak!
The time is ripe!
Come in thy glory!"
He would have died for Him.

A day came,
And he brought me silver pieces.
"What's this?" I cried, "How many?"
He answered,
"Thirty."

"What! What!" I marveled, and he said,
"Put it in the bag. The fools that gave it
Outbid themselves for naught. But after this day,
There are some now wives that may be widows,
There are some now fathered that may be fatherless.
If we are gone," he said, "there is the bag.
Let the brethren look to it—and you."
"Gone?" I cried, "where will you be going, then?"
He laughed and shuddered and wept.

"The time has come," he whispered,
"Now it must be! Look well, look well, thou
Rome!
They have come to Him to prove Him—
Let them learn!
Oh, chariots and horsemen of my Father!
Oh, blinding death! Oh, paradise!"
He choked.
"You mean, you will die?" I muttered, and he,
"Who knows?
I have thought perhaps we shall be swept up
together. . . .
What matter? I am to point Him out. None
knows it.
It may be the world ends to-night. I have waited
For this. Remember—if you live—*my* sign it
was

That loosed the lightning.

(Chariots of fire,

Wheeling in thunder to us!)

Ah, the fools! They'll come

To trap a wandering Carpenter—and God

Burns out at them!"

He reeled off, writhing and staring.

And I saw Judas

Never again.

They told me when he hailed

And kissed that Prophet, that he looked straight upward.

Not at his Master nor at any Roman,

But upward, peering.

Was there never a soul

But me, knew why?

Oh, chariots of his Father

That came not! Oh, the glory! Oh, Iscariot,
That hanged himself in shame of his lost soul!
He was betrayed, I tell you, *he* was betrayed,
God from the heavens betrayed him—
Whom I curse.
Alas, alas, Iscariot, loathed of men,
Betrayed by God!

Alas, alas, Iscariot!

SOCRATES' WIFE

My dust has long been peace. And I love peace.
Ever I loved it. No more now than then.
My neighbors called me shrew. They never lived
With a demon that asked questions.
In this urn,
I that am dust am questionless. Pass by,
All talkers and all questioners, pass by!
Peace and the dust lie here—pass by, pass by!

(1)

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